

Cardinal Czerny on if Pope Leo is a new Francis, a new Benedict - or something else

Cardinal Michael Czerny was one of the four Jesuits and four Canadian cardinals among the 133 cardinal electors from 70 countries who voted in the conclave that elected Pope Leo XIV on May 8. Born in Czechoslovakia, his family emigrated from the Communist-run country when he was just 2 years old and found refuge in Canada, where he studied and joined the Jesuits. He later worked in the Jesuit Curia in Rome as well as Africa and Central America. Cardinal Czerny worked closely with Pope Francis during his 12-year pontificate. The first Latin American pope appointed him to head the office for migrants and refugees and then appointed him as prefect of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, a post Pope Leo has confirmed him in until further notice.... In this interview with Gerry O'Connell's, America's Vatican correspondent, conducted at his apartment next to the Jesuit Curia in Rome, on May 13, Cardinal Czerny spoke about the significance of the election of an Augustinian pope and how he is likely to lead the Catholic Church with its 1.4 billion members.

We had a pope who was strongly dependent on Ignatian spirituality. Now we have another pope who comes from a different religious tradition, the Augustinian tradition. How do you understand this?

It's too early to understand, but this would be my hope. Since I'm also a Jesuit, I know how much Pope Francis relied on very basic elements and dynamics of Ignatian spirituality; they were part of him, but he didn't explain them very much. Whereas I have the impression that Pope Leo will probably have an equally profound dependence on Augustinian spirituality. Already, I think he is doing a good job sharing his spirituality with everyone, rather than just using it. In other words, there's something pedagogic, something communicative about what we have learned in four or five days about Augustinian spirituality, which we didn't hear before.

There was much talk about discernment and spiritual exercises under Pope Francis, and many people who lacked knowledge of the Ignatian background struggled to understand what that meant.

That's right. I am sure it's equally true of both men that their respective traditions—from St. Ignatius and St. Augustine—were deeply, deeply part of who they were, but I have the impression that Pope Leo kind of brings it forth or shares it in a more direct way. It doesn't leave you so much guessing.

We heard that cardinals in the pre-conclave meetings suggested two things: that the heads of dicastery should meet regularly, maybe once a week, with the pope; and, second, that the cardinals, who often don't know each other, should meet once a year with the pope. Those ideas are there?

I think if you had been at our first meeting with Pope Leo, yes, we had the speech, but even then, you know, the feeling in the room was of the [need for] dialogue.

On social media, a lot of people say what Leo is doing is not in continuity with Francis: He wore the mozzetta, he gave the blessing in Latin to the journalists, he rides in an SUV, and so on. What would you say to those who don't read the speeches and say that this is a kind of a "new Benedict"?

First of all, I think it's marvellous that we have this new pope from the Americas; this excites so much joy, so much interest all over the world. This is truly great. This is not the really difficult church of 15 years ago; this is a church full of life and of hope. So that's wonderful.

I don't know Prevost, now Pope Leo, very well, so I can't speak with great conviction, but I suspect that these are individual, particular choices. I don't think he's the kind of man who sends coded messages. I think he makes his choices based on what the situation is, and if we really want to understand what each of these choices means, then we have to ask the question in three or six months or a year, when we look back and say in the first three days he hinted in this direction or he hinted toward that sort of thing.

Second, I think there are gestures that are more inclusive and reconciling that he's making, for example, how he dressed and how he behaved in those first days.

You mean as a way of connecting with those who were a little disaffected by Francis' way of being?

That's right. Whereas those who were not disaffected by Francis can read or can see that he is clearly in Francis' line.

What do you think will be his priority, given that there appear to be several top issues, as we saw in his first speech: peace, synodality, dialogue, the poor? He had a phone call yesterday with Ukraine's President Zelenskyy, and will meet him and many heads of state at the inauguration Mass.

I'm sure he will not go into his meetings with the heads of state with something prepared to say to them. He will listen to them. I really don't expect a foreign policy initiative then.

That's a characteristic you've already concluded about him: He's a listener.

If you ask me what the favourite keyword of the papacy of Pope Francis is, it's the word listening. Listening runs through his whole papacy, and in another form, the name is dialogue. It covers every big step along the way, to the point where, surprisingly, if you ask him, so what could be the solution for all these huge problems in the world, [his answer] is one word: listening. And I believe that Leo is not only equally committed to listening, but has a way of doing it, which might be even more inclusive or accessible than Francis. Interestingly enough, the first thing that struck me at the meeting [of cardinals] with him was the synodal style. [It began with] a short and very kind, very friendly introduction, followed by silence. Then he said, "Turn to your two or three neighbours, and share." And we did. Then came the questions, and he took as many questions as time allowed. This is Francis'—now Leo's—contribution to synodality. This is how you do it. You listen, you let the thing enter your eyes, you pray, you open yourself, you share with the two or three around you, or with a table of 10. But it's the same thing. And then you can have the dialogue.

Pope Leo speaks English. How do you think this will change things, given that he will be able to speak with heads of state like President Trump without interpreters?

It's going to be highly significant. Since I speak some of the Vatican languages but English first, I witness how often the translation is very poor. Since he can speak perfectly in the world's majority language, this is a great gift to the church.

From your experience in Latin America, what do you think Leo brings to the papacy, given that he has worked for some 20 years in Peru?

He has been reshaped, you might say, in the Latin American way, by a commitment that precedes his being a bishop, in his long years of deep involvement there. One could go through some of the qualities or even priorities of the church in Latin America and see that they have become his. I think this very deep and complex experience of being a missionary in a specific place, with specific people and a specific culture is a great gift. You could say it's a gift that Francis didn't have. Francis was a bishop in his own culture, but this experience of being a missionary to a culture other than your own is, and I say this from personal experience, a very expanding, deepening, liberating experience that shapes you.

Most people expect Pope Leo to go back to live in the palace. How do you read that?

I read that as an element of priority. Let me explain. Francis launched processes; he said what should be done, and he did it. Leo is going to see them through. That's my opening premise. Specifically, the process of reforming the Curia has been launched. Leo will see it through. One contribution to seeing it through is an act of nearness or comfortableness. He's more at ease with the [Roman] Curia [than Francis was]. He wants to work with the Curia, and he wants the Curia to work with him. And living there [in the palace] is a way of saying that, while living at Santa Marta sends a different message.

You've worked in the Roman Curia for 15 years. What do you think needs to be done?

My one-word answer is "together." Before we say that this or that has to be changed or improved or dismantled, let's work together, and then we'll see. To me, that's the key. That was the key thing that was missing until now; it's like you have a motor and you have all the parts of the motor, but they have to be put together to function.

Pope Francis was very strong on the major social, political and economic issues of our day. Do you feel Leo is going to be as strong?

I think he will be as strong, but I think he will be less activist or protagonist on them. I think he will be concerned about them; he will see to it that they are promoted and dealt with, but not necessarily the way Francis did it.

Do you think his choice of Leo for his name is significant?

I so much appreciate the name and the obvious reference to "*Rerum Novarum*" because I don't know if there is a greater, more inclusive theme of concern for the vast majority of people on the planet than work, and that is so threatened by not only A.I. and the market model that Francis criticized so much but also by climate change, by war and violence and human rights violations. You could say work is the central theme today. I really appreciate him quietly saying our church is going to accompany God's people, all people, in this very fundamental concern that everyone has a very good job.